

Identity: Received through Revelation or Conceived through Revolution? (3/20/22)

Sermon Description: Is identity found in looking outward or inward? Is it more readily formed through expression of self or assimilation to community? Is it namely about being seen and heard by the world or by the world hearing and seeing another? Why is this so important? Because the answers to these questions are reverberating within current conversations about culture, sexuality, education, freedom of speech, politics, and therapy.

Main Passage: Ephesians 3:1-13

Title: Identity: Received through Revelation or Conceived through Revolution?

Topics: New Creation > Identity

Tags: identity, individualism, modernity, post-modern, therapy

Questions to consider:

- In today's passage Paul mentions "mystery" four times. Why can Christians be confident that this mystery has been revealed to us by God rather than something we need to discover?
- Currently in our culture, identity is being conceived of by looking inward where one's personal happiness is foremost. How do you respond to the pressures of putting self at the center rather than Christ?

Week #10

Introduction: The Matrix – a year's worth of sermon illustrations in 1999

The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self – a year's worth of sermon illustrations in 2022

Why I appreciated this book was how it articulated the precursors to the cultural moment in which we live. How did we get here? Why are we the way that we are? This book spends a great deal of time walking through historical influences and voices which have given rise to Self as the center. And that is spoken to in today's sermon text.

Ephesians 3:1–13

¹For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— ²Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, ³that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. ⁴In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, ⁵which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. ⁶This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

⁷I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. ¹⁰His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. ¹²In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. ¹³I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

Where we've been:

1. Chapter 1 – the glory of God
2. Chapter 2 – the gospel of God

Today, let's begin by examining the first verse and last two verses of our passage:

1. ¹For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—
2. ¹²In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. ¹³I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory.

These verses indicate Paul's current situation. He's imprisoned. And the reason for his imprisonment is not thievery. He's imprisoned on account of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it's very clear that he sees himself not as a prisoner of the State. He is in the position he is on account of his relationship to and preaching of Jesus Christ.

It's possible, even likely, that the group receiving this letter would have been read by a group that knew that. What is more, they may have had questions for Paul. Because he has spoken of a "freedom" that is found in Christ alone. He even says in verse 12, that we have freedom and confidence to approach God. So how can Paul be utterly free while imprisoned? The gospel which prioritizes the spiritual over the physical, the eternal and invisible over the temporary and visible. So much so that he can say, "Don't be discouraged for me." In fact, if he had to do all over again, he wouldn't change it. Why? His sufferings due to preaching the gospel are worth it...so that the Ephesians might hear the good news of Jesus Christ and believe. That belief in Christ results in an eternal glory. So Paul says that he'd do it all over again.

On one level, this is a word from Paul to the Ephesians. On another level, Paul depicts Jesus Christ. Paul's actions point to the actions of Christ. Paul's words should remind us of the words of Jesus Christ. Effectively, Jesus was also imprisoned. Though he had done nothing wrong, he was taken captive like a common criminal. What is more, Jesus suffered and even died. That suffering was not in vain. It achieved a salvation, a loosening of bonds, freedom for you and for me. It was for the joy set before Jesus that he endured the cross. He would do it all over again so that we through faith in him might have freedom and confidence to approach God. That's good news.

The mystery received through revelation

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Two things here:

1. There is a mystery. And, in ages past, it was unknown. Twice in our passage for today, it's shared that this mystery was not made known in previous generations. What is this mystery? It is Christ. It is the salvation of God secured through the cross and verified in the resurrection. And that truth has all kinds of implications including verse 6, which we spent time last week unpacking in detail at the end of chapter two.
2. Consider how many times in this passage terms like grace, given, revelation, and revealed are used. Ten different times in our passage for today, it speaks of revelation coming from God to us. It speaks of God's grace being given. We are the recipient. God is the giver. God made things known that would have otherwise remained unknown. As I've said before, it's revelation not education. The gospel is disclosed to us; it's not discovered by us. This is critically important to Paul's understanding and preaching. And so we need to hear it. We are not the source. We are the creator. We don't derive our own meaning and identity. It comes to us. We are given new life and new identity in Christ, by Christ, for Christ.

Paul's story of receiving through revelation

⁷I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, ⁹and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.

Let's jump over to Acts 9 to see in greater detail how it is that Paul receives revelation.

Acts 9:1–6

¹Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ²and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" ⁵"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. ⁶"Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."

How compelling to read that Paul, formerly trying to imprison Christians, has become a Christian and is now imprisoned for his faith. And though not looking for Christ, Christ has been looking for Paul. And on that Damascus road, Jesus reveals himself to Paul. He discloses himself. Paul wasn't seeking him. Paul, in his education, didn't find him. Christ came to him by revelation.

Acts 9:11–16

¹¹The Lord told (Ananias), “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. ¹²In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.” ¹³“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your holy people in Jerusalem. ¹⁴And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.” ¹⁵But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. ¹⁶I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

Paul is to proclaim the name of Jesus to the nations. And, on account of such preaching, he will suffer, which has been indicated in our passage for today.

Recapitulation of passage so far:

Paul received through revelation // The mystery (Christ!) received through revelation

- God's grace that was given to me for you (v. 2)
- mystery made known to me by revelation (v. 3)
- not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit (v. 5)
- gift (of being a servant) of God's grace given (v. 7)
- gift (of preaching) of God's grace given, which was hidden in the past (vv. 8–9)

The mystery revealed to heavenly realms

¹⁰His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

How surprising it should be for the reader to hear the vehicle through which God wants his manifold (multi-varied) wisdom to be made known. Former Hope staffer, Rob Warland, when teaching on this passage would leave it blank where it says “church”. Read the passage and consider how many other means you and I might choose to make God known. I just think of all the amazingness described in chapter 1. That would showcase God's greatness, I think. Or other works of God's creation—the stars above, the seas below, the mountains which rise high, or the valleys low. Yet it says he has chosen the church to declare on earth and in the heavens his purposes.

About this, Pastor Davis was asked and replied: “The church is showcasing what has been revealed in Christ to the earthly world and the heavenly realms not in their perfect demonstration

but, in fact, in its opposite: the church regularly making a mess of things individually and corporately, but we continue to return to the only one with a word of grace that exists for weary, divided people like us.”

Now, given this Scriptural teaching, I ask, “How does this square with the cultural moment in which we live?”

So I return to Trueman’s seminal work, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*.

We all live in a world in which it is increasingly easy to imagine that reality is something we can manipulate according to our own wills and desires, and not something that we necessarily need to conform ourselves to or passively accept... Those philosophical claim of Friedrich Nietzsche, in which human beings are called to transcend themselves, to make their lives into works of art, to take the place of God as self-creators and the inventors, not the discoverers, of meaning.
Pages 41-42

Consider how this quote, reflecting our cultural moment, contrasts with our passage for this morning. God’s will and desires versus our will and desires. Conformity to God (or, at least, community) or rejection to such conformity. Called to worship the transcendent versus called to be transcendent. Trust that we are God’s works of art versus make our lives works of art. See God as Creator versus take his place as self-creators. Inventors of meaning versus discoverers (or how I’ve said receivers) of meaning.

Below is a compare and contrast of several ideas in the book.

Sacred Order Upheld

Look upward (or, outward)
External moral compass
Priority: Spiritual/Communal
Moral truth
Gender/Sexuality as part
Biological realities>>Inner convictions
Historical/Traditional norms and authority upheld
Authentic, fulfilled human self defined by God/Community
Receive identity

Self Order Upheld

Look inward
Internal moral compass
Priority: Personal
Emotional preference
Gender/Sexuality as priority
Inner convictions>>Biological realities
Historical/Traditional norms and authority dismantled
Authentic, fulfilled human self defined by Self
Conceive identity

Trueman again:

If nature possesses no intrinsic meaning or purpose, then what meaning there is must be created by human beings themselves...the direct challenge to create meaning posed by Nietzsche, along with the explosive technological power of the Industrial Revolution, fueled a view that the world was increasingly the raw material of human creativity, not the act of divine creation. The social imaginary emerging in the 19th century was one that intuitively placed human beings as the sovereigns at the center of a universe to which they could give shape and significance. Pages 195-196

Two arenas that this has impacted:

1. Therapy/Counseling: Formerly, therapy was engaged around helping the person in need better navigate external forces (such as God, community, workplace, etc.). More recently, given the self-order which increasingly rooted itself, therapy prioritizes organizing life according to the person's internal moral compass. The therapist has a much smaller role in leading and, where necessary confronting, than in past times. Their role is to support, often without judgment or criticism, the patient as they journey ahead.
2. Institutions: Formerly, institutions held a certain authority. They were widely recognized, on account of tradition, as having sway over public life and out for the public's best interest. More recently, given the push away from external authorities, the elevation of internal desires, and, admittedly, failures within many of these institutions, they are being viewed as preventing happiness within life. So they are being rejected or dismantled.

Now, realize some of these institutions need help. This is not to say that such public or corporate authorities have been perfect. They have not. But what I think is important for us to see is not the rejection of one or two institutions; it's the rejection of authority itself that is being fostered.

One more from Trueman:

Few people have read Nietzsche, but many intuitively think in Nietzschean ways about their relationship to the natural world precisely because the highly technological world in which we now live—a world in which virtual reality is a reality—makes it so easy to do so. Self-creation is a routine part of our modern social imaginary. And that is simply another way of saying that this is also a significant component of how we imagine our personal identities, our selves...[In such a world] given purpose collapses into any purpose I choose to create or decide for myself. Page 42

“Given purpose” or purpose given by God to us, in our cultural moment, is rejected. It collapses in on itself. And who chooses to create or decide purpose? I do! For me. You do you. You live your best truth. I'll live mine. Self-creation. Self-desires. Self-imagination. Self-identity. Self. Self. Self.

So, again, I ask you to consider our cultural moment, as depicted in the commentary by Trueman, in contrast to the word of God.

Consider this parallel passage from God's word:

Colossians 1:27, 2:2–4

²⁷To (you) God has chosen to make known among the nations the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory...²My goal is that (you) may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that (you) may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that (you) may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.

Hope Community, do not be deceived. Do not be taken by fine-sounding arguments. Do not surrender to the idolatry of Self. EVERY. SINGLE. ONE. OF. US. Has some of this in us. Right now. Right now Self wants to rise up against the knowledge of God. We want to be the center. We want to receive the praise. We want to be noticed and heard and told that no one is like us. We're all Expressive Individualists. We all struggle to receive the revelation of God. And we are all tempted to conceive of our own identity, some of which looks like the revolution of self not at play in our culture.

Currently in our culture, identity is being conceived of by looking inward where one's personal happiness is foremost.

So I want to ask, "How will you respond to the pressures of putting self at the center rather than Christ?" The cross looms large, front and center, within our sanctuary. May it also be so within our lives and faith. You are not what you do. You are not what you might build in the lifetime. You are not your thoughts. You are the Lord's, for those who trust in him. Don't look inward. Look upward. Look to Christ!

MATRIX



Foreword by Rod Dreher

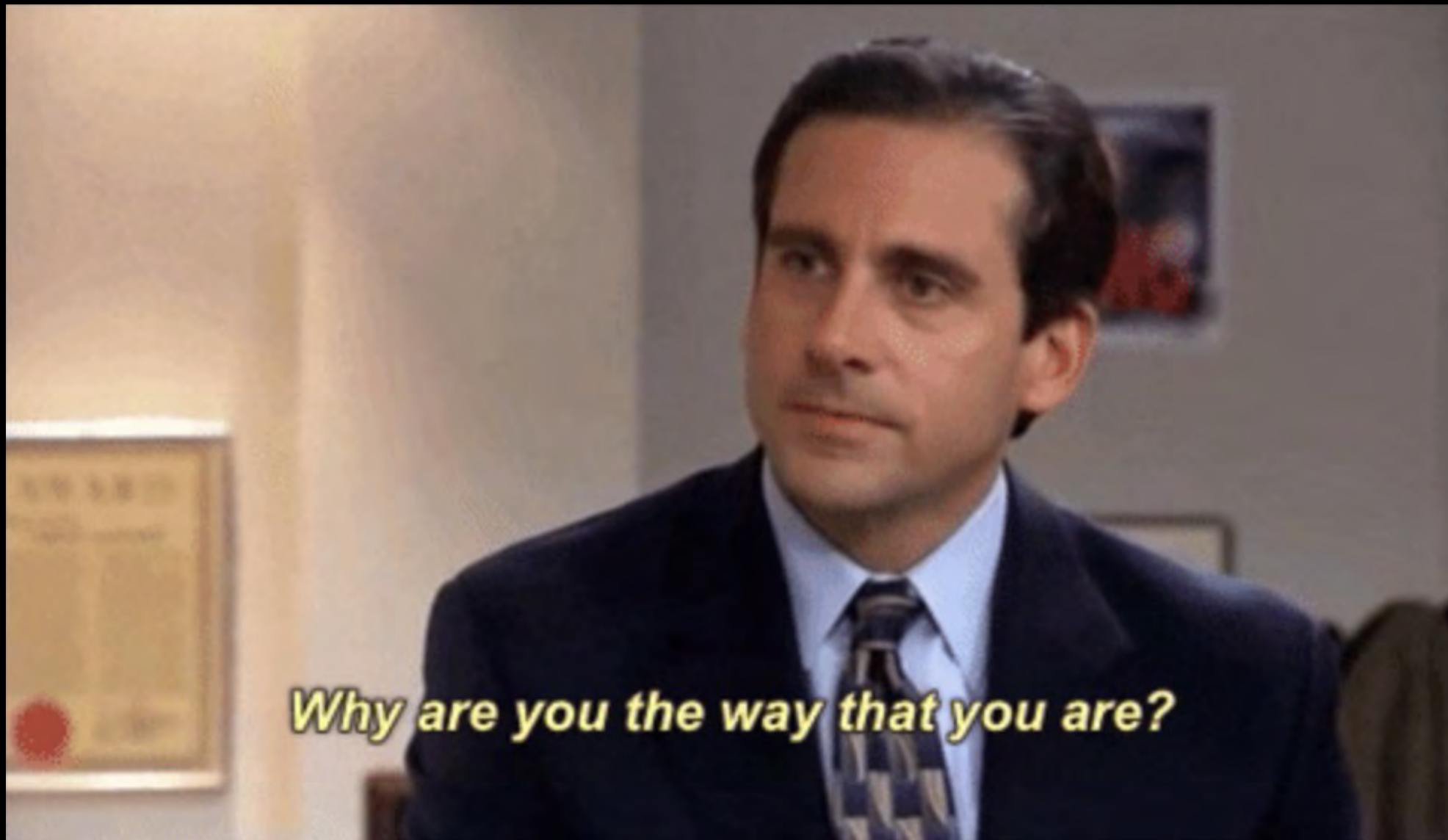
THE RISE AND TRIUMPH
of the MODERN SELF



Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism,
and the Road to Sexual Revolution

CARL R. TRUEMAN

Read by the Author



Why are you the way that you are?

Ephesians

Ephesians 3:1-13

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Why this section?

Ephesians 3:1, 13

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Ephesians 3:2–6

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Paul's story of receiving through revelation

Ephesians 3:7-9

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The Conversion of Saint Paul, Luca Giordano, 1690, Museum of Fine Arts of Nancy

The mystery revealed to heavenly realms

Ephesians 3:10–11

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Davis Johnson, husband to Emma, father to Hazel,
Associate Pastor of Outreach and Development, Hope Downtown
Assessment Coordinator, Acts 29



Foreword by Rod Dreher

THE RISE AND TRIUMPH
of the MODERN SELF



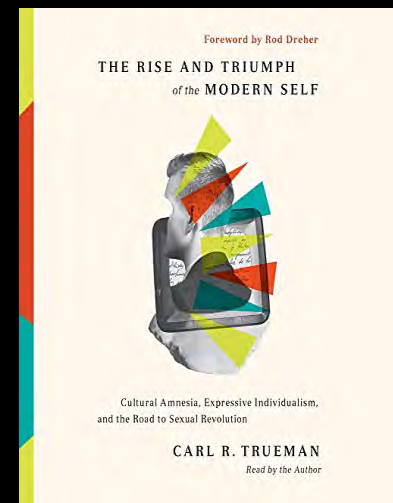
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Pages 41-42.



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Moral truth

Self Order Upheld

Look inward

Internal moral compass

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Emotional preference

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Receive identity

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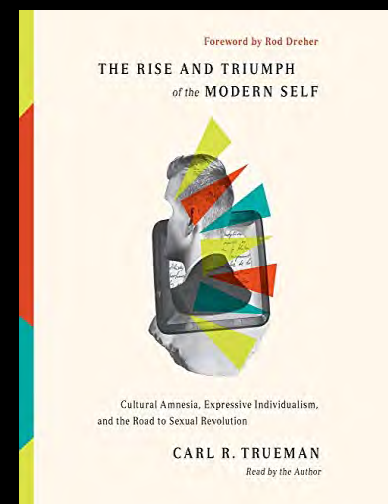
Historical/Traditional norms
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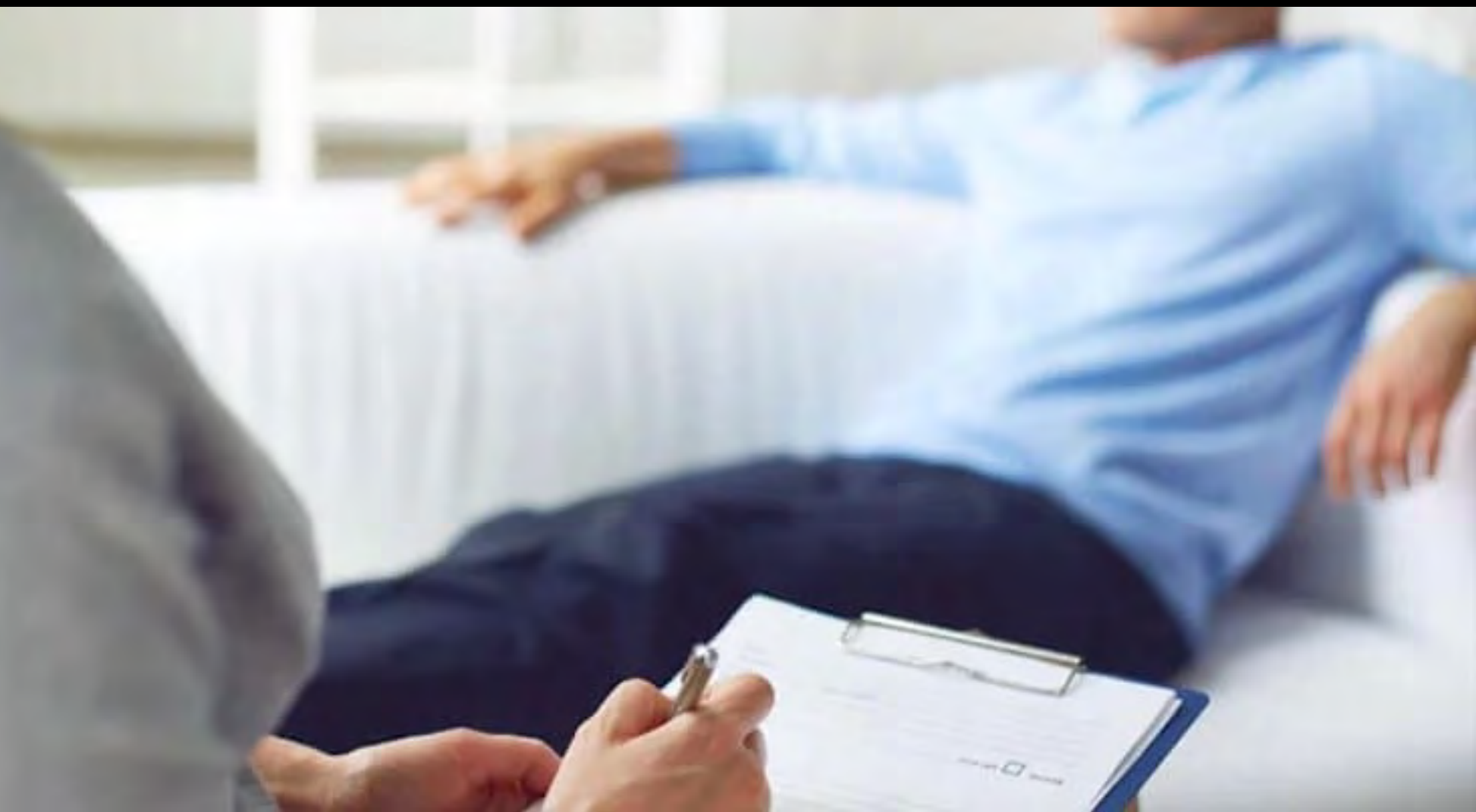
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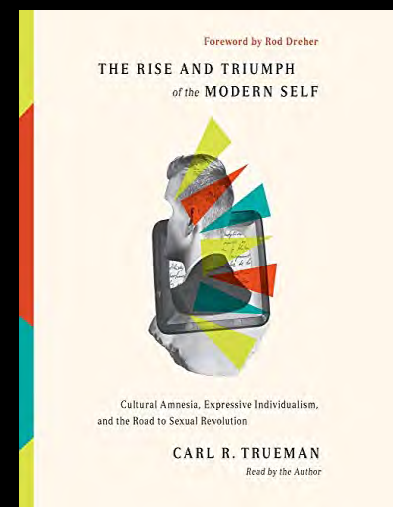






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